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ABSTRACT

The state of Illinois is developing a statewide Individualized Education Program (IEP) training program for school staff to improve the effectiveness of IEP development and implementation. The training will cover three dimensions: (1) knowledge and awareness of required components, required participants, required timelines, rationale and purposes, legal issues, and elements of good IEPs; (2) the IEP process, including communication, consensus building, group dynamics, conflict resolution, planning, and time management; and (3) the IEP product, focusing on legal appropriateness, clearness, support for placement, and usefulness as a communication and instructional tool. Training will consist of a training manual and a 1-day workshop presented to school-level multidisciplinary teams. Based upon the experience of Illinois at approximately the midpoint in developing the program, conclusions include: there appears to be widespread misunderstanding about the purposes, rationale, and underlying philosophical framework of the IEP process and document, which is a contributor to hostility and negative perceptions concerning the IEP mandate; training should be conducted with the same team members for all three dimensions; and university faculty should be involved in the training to ensure consistency at the preservice and inservice levels. (Contains 21 references.) (JDD)

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TRAINING IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE IEP's: THE ILLINOIS EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The cornerstone of the historic federal special education law is the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Its potential for individualizing and improving the quality of education for children with disabilities has always been a focal point of the law. Yet, most research and experience over the last 18 years have demonstrated that the potential has largely gone unfilled. There have been numerous problems with implementing the IEP mandate and there is a great deal of dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the IEP process and resulting document.

A key factor in the ineffectiveness of IEP development and implementation appears to be a lack of adequate training on the part of school personnel. To address this issue the State of Illinois developed and implemented a statewide IEP training program for school staff. This training was designed around three dimensions:

(1) Knowledge and Awareness
(2) The IEP Process
(3) The IEP Product

Training consisted of a training manual and an all-day workshop presented to school-level multidisciplinary teams. During 1992 over 1,000 school staff members were trained in Dimension 1. That experience resulted in a number of conclusions and recommendations regarding methods and techniques for training in the effective development and implementation of Individualized Education Programs.

TRAINING IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE IEPs: THE ILLINOIS EXPERIENCE

When the Education for all Handicapped Children Act was first made law in 1975 it held great promise. It predicted a tremendous potential for providing appropriate educational services to children and youth with disabilities. One of the cornerstones of that law, and perhaps its most promising feature, was the Individualized Education Program, or as it has become known, the IEP. Alter and Goldstein (1986) noted that few aspects of the law have received more attention than the IEP. Smith (1992) wrote,

> *For special education there is no document more significant to districts, agencies, administration, teachers, parent and educational advocates, and students. (p. 6)*

However, the reality of the IEP has been substantially less than its promise. Many writers have observed the results of the last eighteen years and concluded that, while the intent of the law remains, substantive change regarding educational planning for students with disabilities has not taken place. For example, an examination of the literature reveals that there has been an evolution in the implementation of the IEP concept (Rivaldi, 1976; Ryan and Rucker, 1986, Schneck, 1980; Goodman and Bond, 1993)), but recent research reveals that the original intent of the IEP is not being met (Smith and Simpson, 1989; Smith 1990a). The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) analyzed 1,618 student IEP's in the 26 states it monitored from April, 1989 to February, 1992. As a result, OSEP cited 150 of the 165 local public agencies visited for noncompliance with federal and state IEP mandates (National Council on Disability, 1993).

Many of the problems with IEPs have been procedural in nature and Thomas (1980) noted that much of the concern regarding IEPs has focused on its procedural aspects. Smith and Simpson (1989) found procedural failures in over half of 214 IEPs of students identified as behavior disordered. Several writers have described mechanistic procedures and the bureaucracy of special education as major constraints to developing timely and effective IEPs (Heshusius, 1982; Mehan, Hertwick and Meihls, 1986).

Yet, while most professionals would agree that there are major problems with IEPs in terms of legal compliance, there is also considerable evidence that the *process* of IEP development has also been very ineffective. Skrtic, Guba, and Knowlton (1985) found several widespread problems relating to the team process aspect of the IEP. These problems were (a) scheduling, (b) time demands, (c) parent apprehension, and (d) professional embarrassment if school personnel disagree. A number of other writers determined that the multidisciplinary or team approach of the IEP process was of doubtful efficacy (Crisler, 1979; Kehle and Guidubalch, 1980). Crisler (1979), in particular, noted that there is no systematic training process for school personnel who must integrate skills and knowledge to develop a comprehensive educational plan.

Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Allen (1982) found in their observation of IEP meetings that regular education teachers and special education teachers either, (a) do not interact at all, or (b) do so superficially. Gilban and Coleman (1981) discovered in their study that regular education teachers were ranked high in their perceived importance to the IEP meeting, but were ranked low in terms of contribution and influence. Research also indicates that there is very little

interaction by parents at IEP meetings, and that they are usually viewed by school personnel as simply recipients of information (Gillie and Coleman, 1981; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, and Curry, 1980; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, and Gibbs, 1981). Pugach (1982) concluded, "It is unlikely that this approach promotes shared decision-making or encourages consistent curricular modification across instructional settings" (p. 374). It is evident that the reality of the IEP is clearly less than its promise. But, in spite of this conclusion, Smith (1990b) has noted that little has actually been done to rectify the situation.

By 1992 Illinois' experience with the IEP had mirrored that of many other states. Although individualized education programs had been in common use in schools for over fifteen years, their effectiveness had been only marginal at best. School personnel, from classroom teacher to superintendent, did not have a clear concept of the purpose and structure of the IEP. Its development in many districts had evolved into an administrative "paper shuffle," something that needed to be done to meet state regulations, but was then usually filed away, not to be used or looked at again until time for the next review meeting. There was not widespread understanding of what the IEP was, how it should be developed and what should be done with it once it was developed. In short, the Individualized Education Program in Illinois was falling far short of its potential.

This conclusion was drawn from a number of sources; a federal OSEP monitoring report, state monitoring of school districts, due process hearings and mediation requests, parent complaints, and school district requests for staff development. Fueled by the OSEP corrective action requirement, the state education agency decided to design and implement a statewide training program in the

development of effective IEPs. Through a series of meetings, state education agency staff developed a training plan to address the IEP issues in Illinois. This training program was designed to assist school district staff in not only meeting the legal requirements of the IEP, but also in developing IEPs that would truly be effective in improving educational services for students with disabilities.

The Plan in Illinois

Although OSEP's corrective action requirement addressed only the legal appropriateness of IEPs, it was evident from the above sources that the problems went beyond a lack of understanding of compliance issues. School personnel lacked an understanding of the rationale and conceptual framework of the IEP, tending to see it only as a monitoring document. School staff members, in general, also did not evidence much skill in the process of developing or using IEPs. As a result, the IEP training plan in Illinois was designed around three primary dimensions, as can be seen in Figure One.

Three Dimensions of IEP Training

Knowledge and Awareness	*The IEP Process*	*The IEP Product*
Required Components	Communication	Legally Appropriate
Required Participants	Consensus Building	Reflects Process
Required Timelines	Group Dynamics	Clear and Appropriate
Rational and Purposes	Conflict-Resolution	Supports Placement
Other Legal Issues	Planning	Communication Tool
Elements of Good IEPs	Time Management	Instructional Tool

Figure One: The Dimensions of Illinois' IEP Training Program

Knowledge and Awareness

This dimension was designed to provide a basic understanding of the Individualized Education Program. The knowledge and awareness dimension provides trainees with an understanding of the philosophical and legal background

of the IEP. It includes a survey of the IEP document and process, including mandated components, a rationale and framework for writing appropriate IEPs, and an understanding of the basic elements of good IEP writing. This dimension was intended to bring all training participants to a common level of knowledge and to set the stage for subsequent training. It also met OSEP's corrective action requirement by dealing with those regulatory areas that were the most troublesome to schools.

The IEP Process

This dimension deals with the actual process of developing the IEP. As indicated in Figure One it includes skills in such areas as:

a) Communication

b) Consensus building

c) Conflict - resolution

d) Planning

e) Time management

f) Group dynamics

The purpose of this dimension is to help trainees become skilled in the group process. An examination of the research, as well as state monitoring activities, parent complaints, and due process hearings demonstrated that this is a major problem in developing effective IEPs. Most school staff have no formal training in group process skills, in conflict resolution, or in effective planning, yet these skills are essential if the IEP process is to be successful. For these reasons the Illinois State Board of Education determined to develop an intensive training program in the process of IEP development. In order for this training to be effective,

participants must have the opportunity to engage in small group instruction, role playing, simulation activities, and structured observations.

The IEP Product

Three aspects of the IEP document are of particular concern:

(1) It must meet all legal and regulatory requirements.

(2) It must accurately reflect the process that took place.

(3) It must be a relevant, useful, and useable document that can be translated into appropriate educational services.

It is important for the IEP to accurately reflect what occurred during its development process and to accurately describe the services the student is receiving and why he/she is receiving those services. Training in this dimension consists of practice in writing appropriate and effective goals and objectives, linking the IEP to the assessment process, and making appropriate service and placement decisions that are supported and understandable from the IEP document. Participants also need to learn to produce a document that is useful to service providers. This means that the document must be clear, understandable, and provide sufficient detail, but not be so detailed that it becomes cumbersome to develop and use.

The Training Plan

The procedure developed to provide training across these three dimensions included a number of steps.

1. A workshop manual would be developed for each of the three training dimensions. The manuals would be in a "trainer of trainers" format that would include all handouts, transparencies and visual aids along with goals, objectives, an outline of each topic, and a suggested presentation text. The

manuals would be developed by a team consisting of a consultant from outside the state, SEA staff, representatives from LEA's, representatives from colleges and universities, and parents.

2. Training teams would be formed of SEA staff and local school district staff. Teams would consist of four people each, and training sessions would be conducted for trainers to assure consistency of information across teams. Teams would then rehearse and practice together to refine the presentation material and to become more comfortable as a team.
3. A series of workshops would be scheduled across the state in each geographic region. Schools would be requested to send multidisciplinary teams to the workshops. These teams would be asked to make a commitment to become IEP trainers in their respective school districts.
4. During the training sessions, information from the training manuals would be presented to participants from a "trainer of trainers" perspective. In other words, it would be presented in a way that would assist participants in returning to their own schools as trainers for their staff.
5. Question and answer sessions would be conducted in the middle and at the end of the eight-hour workshop. Questions asked and answers given would be recorded at each workshop and taken back to the SEA staff for review and refinement. A written text of questions and their appropriate answers would then be provided later to each school district.
6. Participants would return to their own schools to conduct IEP training, and the SEA staff would provide support and follow-up training when requested.

Status of Training Plan

Currently the State Board of Education has completed half of this training program. A manual on the first dimension of training was completed in February, 1992. This manual was designed to address knowledge and awareness and contained a number of components as illustrated in Figure Two.

Dimension 1 IEP Training: Knowledge and Awareness

Rationale and Purpose	*Legal Appropriateness*	*Elements of Good IEPs*
1. Overview of training 2. Activities that precede IEP a) Suspected disabilities b) Referral for evaluation c) The evaluation report d) Notice and consent forms e) The evaluation conference 3. Rationale for IEP activities a) Review of research b) Overview of IEP process	1. The IEP meeting a) Participants/Roles b) Purposes and functions c) Timelines & notifications 2. Overview of IEP components a) Gathering information b) Current performance levels c) Annual goals, STO's d) Special education services e) Projected dates, evaluation	1. Study of components 2. Connections between components 3. Guided practice 4. Placement considerations 5. Implementation process 6. Conclusions and wrap-up 7. Resource materials

Figure Two: Structure of Dimension 1 IEP Training

This training manual was put into a looseleaf format and distributed to each workshop participant. During the Winter and Spring of 1992 approximately 1,000 school staff from across the state were trained in a series of workshops. Extensive evaluation data was collected through written questionnaires and follow-up sessions with selected participants. Questions were compiled during the question and answer periods and, after accounting for duplication, seventy questions were reviewed by SEA staff and extensive responses developed. The questions and their respective answers were distributed to school district staff in the state.

During the Fall and Winter of 1992-93 discussion sessions were conducted with the state's IEP consultant and SEA staff. The result of these sessions will be

the development of the Dimension 2 training manual. Once this manual, which is nearing completion, is finished, Dimension 2 training will be scheduled and conducted throughout the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based upon the experience Illinois has had up to this point with it's IEP training program, a number of conclusions and recommendations can be formulated regarding effective IEP training.

1. Despite its existence for eighteen years, most school staff members do not appear to have a strong conceptualization of the IEP. There appears to be widespread misunderstanding about the purposes, rationale, and underlying philosophical framework of the IEP process and document. Therefore, any training on IEP development should strongly address this issue. Trainers should not take for granted that trainees possess an adequate understanding of the purposes, rationale and conceptual basis of the IEP process and document.
2. The above lack of understanding is a key contributor to a great deal of hostility and negative perceptions concerning the IEP mandate. Many school staff view it as an administrative and bureaucratic process with no basis in sound educational practice. Any training in IEP development should focus on dispelling this perception. This can best be done by helping school staff understand the rationale for the IEP, to feel more comfortable with its development, and to assist in making it a useful process and document. Attention also needs to focus on helping schools overcome the scheduling, paperwork, and time constraints involved in the IEP process. These constraints also contribute to a negative perception of the process of IEP

development.

3. Another key contributor to the perceptions described above is the lack of consistency among professionals regarding both legal compliance and best practice aspects of the IEP. It is important that training programs reflect as much consistency as possible. This is especially true of state education agency staff and particularly among those SEA staff doing the training and these staff members conducting monitoring activities. Local school staff receive many mixed messages when trainers tell them one thing and monitors tell them something that, at least, "sounds" different.
4. There is a great discrepancy in perceptions, knowledge base and agendas among various categories of school personnel regarding the IEP. For that reason it is important to focus IEP training on school-level multidisciplinary teams. Considerable time should be devoted to bringing staff members to the same knowledge and understanding level and assisting them in learning how to function well as a team.
5. The three-dimensional training accurately addresses the framework needed for effective IEP development. However, the training should be conducted with the same LEA team members for all three dimensions and there should be extensive opportunities for hands-on activities, simulations, role-playing and feedback.
6. The trainer of trainers model can be effective if done correctly. Trainees need to make a commitment to the model, should be throughly trained, should receive some instruction in adult education techniques, and should be provided assistance and follow-up.

7. University faculty should be involved in the training and should be used as trainers to ensure consistency at the preservice and inservice levels.
8. Parents should be involved in the development of training materials, in the delivery of instruction and as members of LEA training teams.

Although an excellent concept in theory, the IEP has largely failed to live up to its promise. This failure, however, should not be laid at the feet of the concept itself. Rather, it is primarily a result of the way it has been operationlized in states and in school districts across the nation. There is confusion, misunderstanding, lack of consistency, and inadequate skill training among those individuals involved in developing and implementing IEPs. These are the issues that must be addressed if the promise is to be translated into reality. This can only be accomplished by providing timely, comprehensive, consistent, and well-planned training to IEP developers and implementors.

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